

Message Text

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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 4600

EXDIS DISTRIBUTE AS NODIS

E.O. 11652: SGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, MILI, SY, IS, LE
SUBJECT: ISRAELI LEADERSHIP VIEW OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS

REF: TEL AVIV 10204

1. SUMMARY: YADIN AND AYAN APPEAR TO HAVE A COMPLETELY DISTORTED VIEW OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS IN LEBANON. WHETHER THIS PERCEPTION IS BASED ON GENUINE HUMANITARIAN CONCERN OR HARD-HEADED ISRAELI SELF-INTEREST IS NOT CLEAR. WHATEVER THEIR MOTIVATION, HOWEVER, I DO NOT THINK WE CAN AFFORD TO LET THEIR DISTORTIONS AND THREATS GO UNCHALLENGED. END SUMMARY.

2. I AM DISTURBED BY YADIN'S AND DAYAN'S REMARKS DURING THEIR MEETING WITH BILL QUANDT. FROM THE TENOR OF THE REPORTING CABLE THEY APPEAR TO HAVE LOST ALL
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PERSPECTIVE ON THE LEBANESE CRISIS AND ARE IN DANGER OF FRAMING THEIR POLICY ON EMOTIONAL REACTION TO INCOMPLETE AND INACCURATE INFORMATION. A LESS CHARITABLE EXPLANATION OF THEIR POSITION IS THAT THEY ARE HAPPY WITH THE STATUS QUO WHICH TIES DOWN SYRIAN FORCES, GIVES ISRAEL PROTECTION ALONG THE BORDER, AND KEEPS THE PLO IN CHECK, AND WILL DO WHAT THEY CAN TO SEE THAT THIS PRESENT

INSTABILITY PERSISTS.

3. YADIN AND WEIZMAN ARE CORRECT IN ASSUMING THAT THE SYRIANS DO NOT WANT THE CAMP DAVID TALKS TO SUCCEED, BUT PRESIDENT ASSAD AND HIS ADVISORS ARE CONVINCED THESE TALKS WILL FAIL FROM THEIR OWN INERTIA AND ISRAELI INTRANSIGENCE, REGARDLESS OF WHAT SYRIA DOES. IF THE SYRIANS WADE INTO THE RIGHTIST ARMIES IN BEIRUT BETWEEN NOW AND SEPTEMBER 5, IT WILL NOT BE BECAUSE OF SOME VAGUE IDEA THAT SUCH AN ACTION WOULD DESTROY A SUMMIT ATMOSPHERE. IN FACT, IF PAST PERFORMANCE IS ANY GUIDE, SYRIANS WILL BE WARY OF A MAJOR INITIATIVE IN LEBANON WHICH COULD DISTRACT WORLD ATTENTION FROM BEGIN'S "INTRANSIGENCE." IN MARCH, WHEN IT APPEARED THAT BEGIN WAS ON HIS WAY TO A CONFRONTATION IN WASHINGTON, ASSAD WAS FURIOUS WITH THE PLO FOR ITS TEL AVIV ATTACK SINCE IT GAVE BEGIN A CHANCE TO SIDESTEP THE MAIN ISSUE--HIS IMMUTABLE POSITION ON PEACE.

4. IF WHAT DAYAN MEANS BY CLAIMING THAT SYRIA'S PURPOSE IS TO KILL THE REMAINING CHRISTIANS IN BEIRUT IS THAT SYRIA WANTS TO PULL THE TEETH OF THE PHALANGE AND AHRAR ARMIES, THEN HE IS CORRECT. THE SYRIANS DO NOT SEE ANY POSSIBILITY OF ATTAINING A UNIFIED AND INDEPENDENT LEBANON SO LONG AS ANY ONE NON-GOVERNMENTAL FACTION HAS A PREPONDERANCE OF MILITARY POWER. BUT, IF DAYAN SERIOUSLY THINKS THE
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SYRIANS ARE OUT TO DESTROY THE CHRISTIANS AS A COMMUNITY, HE DEMONSTRATES AND APPALLING IGNORANCE OF SYRIAN INTENTIONS, HISTORY, AND INTERNAL STRUCTURE. THE ALAWITES AND CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN TRADITIONAL ALLIES. A SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE OF ASSAD'S SECURITY FORCES ARE MADE UP OF CHRISTIANS. THE SYRIANS WENT INTO LEBANON IN THE FIRST INSTANCE TO SAVE THE MARONITES FROM DESTRUCTION. SYRIA NO MORE WANTS TO SEE A PALESTINIAN-OR MUSLIM-DOMINATED LEBANON THAT IT DOES A MARONITE-DOMINATED LEBANON.

5. THE QUESTION DAYAN ASKS, "WHY CANNOT THE SYRIANS LEAVE," IS BEING ECHOED HERE IN DAMASCUS. SEVERAL ALAWITE GENERALS TOLD A SYRIAN BUSINESSMAN AUGUST 9 THAT THEY WERE SERIOUSLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE COURSE OF EVENTS IN LEBANON AND THE DANGERS LEBANON HOLDS FOR SYRIA. FRUSTRATION HERE IS HIGH OVER ASSAD'S POLICY OF SAVING THE MARONITES ONLY TO BE REPAID WITH OBSTRUCTIONISM, INGRATITUDE, AND BLOODSHED. CONCERN IS MOUNTING THAT SYRIA COULD BE DRAGGED INTO AN UNWANTED AND IMPOSSIBLE WAR WITH ISRAEL. NEVERTHELESS, ASSAD STILL SEES WITHDRAWAL AS AN INVITATION TO CIVIL WAR AND AN OPENING FOR ISRAEL TO INTERVENE AND ESTABLISH A CLIENT STATE TO THE DETRIMENT OF SYRIA'S STRATEGIC

POSITION.

6. AS FOR WEIZMAN'S CONCERN THAT SYRIA MAY MISJUDGE ISRAELI OPTIONS, IT IS A POSSIBILITY. NEVERTHELESS, THROUGHOUT THE TWO YEARS IT HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN LEBANON, SYRIA HAS BEEN HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO THE RISKS OF WAR WITH ISRAEL AND HAS ACTED ACCORDINGLY. INSOFAR AS WE CAN TELL, THERE HAS BEEN NO CHANGE IN THIS SENSITIVITY. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, LIMITS TO WHAT SYRIA CAN TAKE IN THE WAY OF ISRAELI DICTATES OR MILITARY ACTION. IF ISRAEL WORKS ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT IT CAN OPERATE MILITARILY AT WILL IN LEBANON WITHOUT RISKING ALL-OUT WAR WITH SYRIA, IT IS WRONG. THERE IS A POINT AT WHICH SYRIA WOULD PREFER TO RISK DEFEAT OR GLOBAL CONFRONTATION TO HUMILIATION.

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7. IN SHORT, I DO NOT THINK WE CAN LET THE ISRAELI PERCEPTIONS AND THREATS GO UNCHALLENGED. THE SYRIANS ARE OPERATING IN LEBANON OUT OF BLATANT SELF-INTEREST. THUS FAR, THAT INTEREST HAS LED THEM TO POLICY OBJECTIVES WHICH ARE CLOSELY COMPATIBLE WITH OUR OWN EVEN THOUGH WE DISAGREE ON TACTICS. ISRAELI INTENTIONS, HOWEVER, DO NOT APPEAR CLEAR. THEIR ALTRUISTIC CLAIMS OF PROTECTING THE CHRISTIANS FROM ANNIHILATION RING HOLLOW FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, BUT AMBASSADOR LEWIS IS CLEARLY IN A BETTER POSITION TO JUDGE THEIR SINCERITY.

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